

American

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Pentagon: Operations Underway Against Taliban in Kandahar

By Meredith Buel
VOA News

Washington — The U.S. Defense Department says efforts to remove Taliban influence in Kandahar are well underway in advance of what is expected to be a major military operation in June against militants in southern Afghanistan.

Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said U.S. troops for months have been doing the preparatory work for the operation against the Taliban in their spiritual home and birthplace of Kandahar.

Morrell said soldiers are securing routes in and out of the city, which has been rocked this month by suicide bombings and assassinations. "You're seeing additional shaping operations or you aren't seeing them. But they are underway in Kandahar proper by some of our special operations forces, who are right now engaging with tribal elements there, who are facilitating some of the shuras [meetings with tribal leaders] that are taking place, which are also a critical component to the shaping that's necessary for success in Kandahar, and who are also, of course, going after mid-level and high-level Taliban fighters who are holed up within Kandahar proper," he said.

Morrell declined to say when the military will begin significant fighting in the Kandahar region. U.S. officials in Afghanistan say the offensive is expected in June.

President Obama is sending 30,000 additional troops to Afghanistan this year — the bulk of whom are to be deployed in Taliban strongholds in the southern part of the country.

The scale of the American offensive in the Kandahar region is expected to be far greater than the recent attack on insurgents in Marjah, where thousands of U.S. Marines and Afghan Army soldiers began clearing the Taliban in February.

The Pentagon's Geoff Morrell says the Marines are continuing their operations in Marjah because there still is a Taliban presence there. "That is why our forces remain there and in the same kind of numbers that they were when this operation began. That is why, although we are now in the holding and the building phase of this operation, there is still clearing work that remains to be done. And we are still trying to root out Taliban who are dug in and hiding or blending in," he said.

U.S. officials in Afghanistan say the intense phase of the

operation against the Taliban in Kandahar is expected to last about two months and is designed to be complete before the Muslim holy month of Ramadan begins in August.

Morrell says the Pentagon hopes the offensive will deal a fatal blow to the insurgency. "We certainly hope it will be one that will break the back, to a large extent, of the Taliban who have called it home and who have used it as a sanctuary for some time. But I don't think that anybody is of the belief that that operation in and of itself will spell victory in Afghanistan," he said.

Analysts say the military operations in southern Afghanistan are a key test of President Obama's strategy for reversing the rise of the Taliban while protecting the Afghan population.

U.S. Offers \$1.15 Billion for Haitian Recovery

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — International assistance for Haiti is essential not only for its long-term recovery from the January 12 earthquake, but also to address cross-border challenges, such as economic migration, human and drug trafficking, and drug-resistant disease, resulting from the country's continued impoverishment, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said.

In remarks at the opening of an international donor's conference for Haiti in New York March 31, Clinton announced a \$1.15 billion pledge of U.S. assistance for the country. Haitian President René Préval has set a target of \$3.8 billion to meet his country's needs for the next 18 months.

"This money will go toward supporting the government of Haiti's plan to strengthen agriculture, energy, health, security and governance," Clinton said, as well as for cooperation with civil-society groups, private businesses, nongovernmental organizations and Haitian citizens. She added that U.S. assistance will also seek to empower Haitian women, which "will fuel the long-term economic recovery and progress not only for them but for their families."

Clinton said the earthquake had wiped out the results of recent reform efforts that had caused Haiti's economy to grow 3 percent in 2009 and generated new job opportunities.

But "the people of Haiti never gave up," she said. Clinton expressed her confidence in their continued resilience and Haiti's leadership.

Haiti cannot recover on its own, and the international community now faces a choice of helping the country become "an engine for progress and prosperity," or watching its economic, health and infrastructure challenges continue to create misery that will affect not only the Haitian people, but also the global community, she said.

"The lack of sanitation services could cause outbreaks of lethal illnesses, and the lack of reliable medical services could give rise to new drug-resistant strains of disease that will soon cross borders," she said. Drug trafficking and human trafficking, already thriving in tenuous security conditions, will "indirectly affect us all."

Although Haiti has received international assistance in the past, "we cannot do what we've done before," Clinton said. Haiti's government must guide a "strong, accountable and transparent recovery," and donors must "offer our support in a smarter way" through long-term investments in partnership with the government, which will be more effective than "a scattered array of well-meaning projects."

"Let us say here with one voice: We will pass this test," Clinton told fellow donors.

President Préval thanked the conference for the rapidly mobilized assistance that materialized from all over the world following the disaster. He said the Haitian people had been deeply touched "by this movement of solidarity and compassion." He also called for a United Nations emergency force that could quickly deploy in response to natural disasters anywhere in the world.

Préval made a special appeal for assistance in the area of education, which he said is "the prerequisite for development." He said 38 percent of Haitians above the age of 15 are illiterate, 25 percent of school-age children are not enrolled, and those who are in school do not have the resources available to develop genuine life skills. This left the country unprepared to adequately respond to the disaster, he said.

"The earthquake clearly demonstrated this social fracture," he said, and Haitian society "can no longer tolerate" the situation and must repair it "as rapidly as possible."

He envisioned a renewed country as a center of knowledge that celebrates its cultural and linguistic diversity, stemming from its French, English and African past, where all Haitians can provide for their own welfare and receive assistance from qualified individuals.

"Let us dream of a new Haiti whose fate lies in a new society without exclusion, that has overcome hunger, in

which all have access to decent shelter, health provided according to their needs, quality education," where its people can contribute toward the good of all mankind, Préval said.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opened the conference by welcoming a "concrete, specific and ambitious" plan developed by Haitian and international officials to build a "new Haiti" with better schools and health services, and better options for its people than choosing between unemployment and migration.

The plan calls for a trust fund to determine how to spend aid money and a commission to oversee reconstruction work, such as rebuilding schools, hospitals and government offices, as well as returning farms to production and other job creation efforts.

Along with continued emergency assistance, especially for shelter as Haiti copes with its rainy season, Ban estimated that the country will need \$11.5 billion over the next 10 years.

Group of Eight Ministers Urge Strong Steps Against Iran

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — While the Group of Eight leading industrialized nations encourage diplomatic negotiations with the Iranian regime, they are calling on the international community to take "appropriate and strong steps" over Iran's nuclear weapons development program.

"Iran's continued noncompliance with its obligations under United Nations Security Council resolutions, as well as its [International Atomic Energy Agency] obligations, regarding its nuclear program is of serious concern to G8 ministers," the foreign ministers said in a statement.

The G8 foreign ministers from Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States ended a two-day meeting in Gatineau, Quebec, on March 30. The statement is the latest step in efforts to pressure Iran's leaders to abandon attempts to develop nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them.

"Ministers urged in the strongest possible terms that Iran cooperate fully with the IAEA and comply with relevant UNSC resolutions," the statement said. "Ministers agreed to remain open to dialogue, and also reaffirmed the need to take appropriate and strong steps to demonstrate international resolve to uphold the international nuclear nonproliferation regime and persuade Iran to build

greater international confidence in the peaceful nature of its nuclear program.”

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton flatly told an interviewer with Canadian Television (CTV) “no” when asked March 29 if the world may have to accept an Iran with nuclear weapons. But she added that the G8 is not the negotiating forum for the creation of a resolution that might impose effective sanctions against any nation.

“This was informational,” she added. “We discussed the importance of the international community addressing the threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran. We have a lot of work to do in the U.N.”

Efforts have been under way for months by the United States, Britain, France and Germany for a new round of U.N. Security Council-imposed sanctions. But among the six nations that have been attempting to convince Iran to abandon its nuclear program, some debate has arisen over the further use of sanctions now. Russia and China have also participated in the negotiations, but have shown reluctance to seek another round of sanctions.

Clinton also told CTV that China has been part of the consultative group that has been unified throughout the negotiations with Iran’s leaders. She said the entire group “has made it very clear that a nuclear-armed Iran is not acceptable to the international community. And I think as the weeks go forward and we begin the hard work of trying to come up with a Security Council resolution, China will be involved.”

“As in any effort, we’re going to have to try to come to some consensus. And we’re in the middle of that process,” Clinton added.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper told the assembled foreign ministers March 30 that actions by Iran and North Korea to develop nuclear weapons “contravene their international obligations. Both use violence and intimidation to deprive their own citizens of fundamental rights. Both are serious threats to global security.”

Harper called for North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks aimed at eliminating nuclear weapons from the Korean Peninsula, and for Iran to halt its nuclear activities and engage in peaceful dialogue. “We urge a heightened focus, and stronger coordinated action, including sanctions if necessary, on the Iranian regime,” he added.

U.S., EU Committed to Balkan Democracy, Prosperity

Deputy Secretary of State Steinberg leaves for four-country trip

By Keida Kostreci

Staff Writer

Washington — The United States and Europe are deeply committed to supporting democratic institutions and revitalizing economic growth throughout the Balkans, says Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg.

“That commitment is not just a rhetorical one,” Steinberg said during a March 29 briefing at the Washington Foreign Press Center. “From the beginning [of the Obama administration] we have been engaged through frequent high-level visits to the region, starting with the vice president’s trip last May to Sarajevo, Belgrade and Pristina. I myself have had the opportunity to travel to the region half a dozen times since becoming deputy secretary, and I have to say for the most part I have been very encouraged by what I see in the years since I last served in government.”

Steinberg leaves April 6 on a trip that will take him first to Slovenia and then to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo. Steinberg will be joined in Sarajevo by Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos, whose country holds the European Union presidency. He said each of his trips has been with EU counterparts, which reflects the U.S.-EU partnership.

Steinberg described Slovenia as a partner in promoting stability in the Balkans, and also as a NATO ally, particularly in Afghanistan. He said he was pleased to see positive movement toward an arbitration agreement with Croatia on a border dispute between the two countries. The resolution of this disagreement would remove a major hurdle to EU accession talks for Croatia.

A March 20 conference in Brdo, Slovenia, where seven Balkan countries urged the European Union to stay committed to enlargement, was “a welcome example of how the countries in the region can come together to promote stability and opportunity,” Steinberg said.

One force for stability in the region has been Kosovo’s independence, he added.

“It’s experienced enormous progress in its first two years as an independent state, including successful first elections in November, strengthening regional cooperation through its border demarcation with Macedonia, and establishing diplomatic relations with its neighbors and improving inter-ethnic relations through the decentralization process,” Steinberg said.

Within Kosovo, Steinberg said, the United States and European Community want to encourage further

integration. "We recognize that despite the formal differences, that there are common interests there and that it is important to work in ways that do not create greater instability in the region. So we are going to be very much focused on pragmatic levels of cooperation and how to facilitate that and to increase dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina," he said.

Steinberg highlighted some of the positive developments on Serbia's EU integration, such as visa liberalization for Serbian citizens travelling to the EU and the country's application for EU membership.

"I have also been encouraged that Serbia has made it clear it understands the importance of cooperation with the Hague tribunal [the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia] as a key to integration into the Euro-Atlantic community," he said. "We expect Serbia to make every effort to ensure that the remaining fugitives Ratko Mladic and Goran Hadzic will be arrested and transferred to The Hague."

Daniel Serwer at the United States Institute of Peace's Centers for Innovation says that although Belgrade is taking a hard line against Kosovo's independence, some leaders within Serbia are starting to become worried that this unresolved issue will affect their EU prospects.

Serwer suggested one thing that would help would be for Serbia to publish all the data on the aid that it has given to the north of Kosovo, which is dominated by ethnic Serbs.

During his trip to the region Steinberg will visit Sarajevo. In Bosnia's election year, the United States is urging the government and leaders to work together to serve the interests of all citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Steinberg said this means continuing to make progress on Bosnia's integration into Europe and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

"We don't want to see Bosnia fall behind its partners in the region. It deserves and should be right in that same rank as the others, and we will do what we can to help facilitate that," Steinberg said. "And I think it is particularly important in this election year for all of the leaders, all the party leaders, to have a positive vision about their country, to avoid the kind of divisions that can hamper Bosnia's progress and to work to set the conditions for even further progress after the elections in October."

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